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Many college students abuse alcohol and Adderall

‘Alcohol is the most abused substance,’ says counselor Kristen Kidd Donovan. About 10 percent of VCU students may have addiction problems after leaving school.



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From Adderall to alcohol, VCU Counseling Services has seen the gamut of substance abuse problems experienced by college students.

Kristen Kidd Donovan, one of the counselors, says most students at VCU don't abuse alcohol or illegal drugs. "At VCU, the majority of students who drink do so moderately. Roughly a quarter of VCU students don't drink at all," she said. But for those who do, the consequences can be devastating.

Most students who drink do so moderately. 'Roughly a quarter of VCU students don't drink at all,' Donovan says.

Experts say some students may have a high GPA and look fine but could be addicted to drugs. It's a problem that cuts across gender, race and socioeconomic class.

"Alcohol is the most abused substance," Donovan said. The tendency to abuse alcohol can be genetic.

"Alcohol affects people in different ways. Some people are genetically wired to process alcohol efficiently. Some don't feel the intoxicating effects of alcohol until their BAC is in a much higher range than their peers." Donovan said.

She said everyone reacts differently to drugs; alcohol can even cause some people to feel itchy. Problems with alcohol can lead to bigger issues down the road.

"Addiction occurs when someone who is genetically predisposed drinks regularly and in sufficient quantity to become addicted. For some, addiction occurs quickly; for others, it can take years to develop."

According to VCU Counseling Services data, about 20 percent of the university's students drink at levels that can lead to addiction. Roughly half of those students fall into moderate drinking patterns after leaving college. What about the remaining half – approximately 10 percent of VCU students?

"The rest continue drinking at levels that support addiction," Donovan said.

Alcohol is not the only substance being misused by young adults. For many college students, Adderall is the study drug of choice: They pop a tablet before pulling an all-nighter to cram for an exam or write that long-delayed research paper.



A bottle of Adderall quick-release pills. (Photo by Vanessa Gleiser)

Adderall may seem as benign as a few cans of Red Bull, but experts at VCU say such stimulants have serious health consequences.

Adderall is a stimulant designed to help those who have attention deficit disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, learning difficulties and trouble staying focused.

However, many students without a learning disability find ways to get their hands on the drug – for example, by finagling a prescription or buying Adderall from friends.

It may seem as benign as a few cans of Red Bull, but experts at VCU say such stimulants have serious health consequences, including reduced appetite, restlessness, anxiety, sweating and elevation in blood pressure.

That's why VCU is strict about prescribing Adderall. University Student Health Services makes this clear on its website:

"To be considered for ADHD treatment at Student Health, a student must provide a written report of a comprehensive ADHD evaluation completed within the last three years. The evaluation must include objective testing, and the written report must include details of the various tests performed. The most common objective test used for evaluation of ADHD is the CPT or Continuous Performance Test ... Once the reports have been reviewed, students will be notified whether or not ADHD treatment can be provided through Student Health. If approved, an appointment can be scheduled with a physician to discuss care."

Some people think that obtaining Adderall illegally is no big deal. In fact, it's a serious crime, Donovan said.

"Possession of prescription drugs that are not prescribed to you – especially ADHD drugs like Adderall or pain medication like Percocet or Oxycontin – is illegal and can result in a charge

for possession of a Schedule II narcotic,” she said. “A charge like this is especially serious for students hoping to become licensed in a health-care profession.” •